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## Building the Missing Link between the Common Core and Improved Learning

How a state, a school district, and a technical assistance provider are using their best resource—teachers—to implement the Common Core standards for improved teaching and learning

By Amy Coe Rodde and Lija McHugh

The Common Core State Standards adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia have been hailed as “the most important education reform in the country’s history,”<sup>1</sup> raising the bar for what students need to learn at each stage of their K-12 education—and thus raising the bar for the instruction that will drive that learning.

Ultimately, the success of the new standards will be determined by whether they improve teaching and learning in our schools and drive student success in college and careers. But there is a big risk that we as a country are going to miss this opportunity to make deep changes in teaching and learning. As New York Commissioner of Education John King said, “We have to make sure the Common Core doesn’t become just a poster on the faculty room wall. Instruction has to change. I’m not worried about the superintendent who says, ‘There’s so much work to do. This is going to be very challenging, but it’s worth it.’ I am worried about the superintendent who says, ‘The new standards are just like the old standards. This should be an easy transition.’ If we don’t understand how big this change is and how much work it will take, then we will not get it done.”

***“The Common Core rests on a view of teaching as complex decision making, as opposed to something more routine or drill-based... I don’t know now how to say this nicely—well, not all teachers have been prepared to teach in this way.”***

CHARLOTTE DANIELSON, EDUCATION CONSULTANT AND TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS EXPERT

The most important thing that education leaders can do to help the Common Core movement succeed is to support teachers in improving their practice. Teacher effectiveness expert Charlotte Danielson puts it succinctly: “The Common Core rests on a view of teaching as complex decision making, as opposed to something more routine or drill-based...It requires instructional

strategies on teachers’ parts that enable students to explore concepts and discuss them with each other, to question and respectfully challenge classmates’ assertions. So I see the Common Core as a fertile and rich opportunity for really important professional learning by teachers, because—I don’t know now how to say this nicely—well, not all teachers have been prepared to teach in this way.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet the current discussion is focused elsewhere—on teacher evaluations, test scores, and the role the federal government has played in the Common Core movement. Not all field leaders are grasping the opportunity presented by the Common Core to transform teaching and learning. And many teachers themselves—the ones leaders are counting on to effectively implement the Common Core to improve student learning—are not viewing the standards as a departure from the status quo. (See examples of standards by grade and subject in sidebar: “[The Case for the Common Core State Standards](#).”)

A survey of 12,000 math teachers found that 80 percent of teachers see the new math standards as “pretty much the same” as their current standards.<sup>3</sup> Another survey of teachers found that 73 percent of teachers already felt somewhat or very prepared to teach the Common Core—and only 27 percent felt somewhat/very unprepared.<sup>4</sup> This perception needs to change.

Pointing to previous failed efforts for bold reform, political scientist and former Education Sector Interim CEO John Chubb has written of the Common Core: “History is not on its side.” In particular, Chubb has noted, “Standards are only the first step in a long, interdependent chain that ends with student learning, but includes many links in between.”<sup>5</sup>

Identifying and fashioning those “links in between” takes considerable time and effort, as exemplified by the efforts of Kentucky, Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida, and the Center for Inspired Teaching, a technical assistance (TA) provider. All three are seeking to use the Common Core as a way to change the daily work of teachers and students and dramatically improve college and career readiness. In each case, leaders are aiming high to achieve big changes in instruction that can be sustained over time. They are doing so by:

1. Embracing and communicating how significantly the Common Core will raise the bar for student learning, and that this higher bar requires dramatic changes in instruction;
2. Making sure teachers are at the front of the movement and working together to lead their own improvement toward shared, ambitious goals; and
3. Providing teachers with the structures, time, and resources required to sustain the many years and many cycles of inquiry and improvement necessary to achieve the new bar for student learning.

The practices and experiences of Kentucky, Hillsborough County, and Center for Inspired Teaching provide a model for others determined to ensure that the Common Core becomes more than just “a poster on the faculty room wall.”

### **The Case for the Common Core State Standards: American students are not prepared for success in college and career**

In the next decade, nearly 8 in 10 future job openings in the United States will require more than a high school diploma.<sup>6</sup> A college degree provides access to careers that generate significantly more income and greater job stability. Associate’s degree holders earn roughly 30 percent more than high school diploma/GED holders, and Bachelor’s degree holders earn roughly 70 percent more.<sup>7</sup> As such, college credentials can play a critical role in breaking the cycles of intergenerational poverty. Unfortunately, only 19 percent of students graduate high school ready for college-level challenges.<sup>8</sup>

“If you teach the way we’ve taught for years and years, basically we’re robbing our kids of the future,” said Ms. [Kristal] Doolin, who was selected Kentucky Teacher of the Year for 2013.<sup>9</sup>

The Common Core is a set of student learning standards designed to address this problem. The standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students need to learn during their education from Kindergarten through high school so that they are sufficiently prepared for rigorous, college-level work. Championed by National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the push for uniform national standards has attracted broad bipartisan support from educators, state officials, the business community, and the Obama administration.

The goal of preparing students for success in college and career represents a much higher bar for student learning and a significant shift from most states' standards today. But the magnitude of the change may not be apparent until you begin to dig beneath the surface of the reform rhetoric that surrounds the Common Core initiative. The standards for English language arts and math reflect a grade-by-grade progression of the knowledge and skills students must master to succeed in college and the work-a-day world without remedial instruction. Some examples:

- **Kindergarten:** Compose simple shapes to form larger shapes. For example, “Can you join these two triangles with full sides touching to make a rectangle?”
- **Grade 3:** Read grade-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression on successive readings.
- **Grade 5:** Add and subtract fractions with unlike denominators (including mixed numbers) by replacing given fractions with equivalent fractions in such a way as to produce an equivalent sum or difference of fractions with like denominators.
- **Grades 11-12:** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).<sup>10</sup>

Broadly speaking, the new math standards will require students to learn and master many mathematical concepts earlier in their schooling than before, according to a recent report coauthored by Education First and Editorial Projects in Education. Moreover, teachers will be expected to focus longer and more deeply on fewer concepts in each grade and to emphasize conceptual understanding and practical applications of mathematical ideas.<sup>11</sup>

In English language arts, the standards cover reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language, with the overarching aim to improve comprehension, reasoning skills, and analysis. Teachers will now be expected to emphasize the importance of citing evidence from texts, especially informational and nonfiction sources. Since literacy cuts across disciplines, science, social studies, and other subject areas, teachers are expected to teach reading skills unique to their disciplines, such as analyzing primary and secondary source documents in history, and making sense of diagrams, charts, and technical terminology in science.

For more information visit the links below:

Mathematics standards:

<http://www.corestandards.org/Math>

English language arts standards:

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>

Common Core shifts in practice and general overview of the standards:

<http://www.achievethecore.org/getting-started-common-core/implementing-practice-shifts/>

## Kentucky Goes First

Following the 2009 passage of Senate Bill 1, which mandated higher standards for student learning, Kentucky became the first state to adopt the Common Core and is now three years into an ambitious plan to use the new standards to improve teaching across the state.

### **Communicating a strong, consistent message**

From the beginning, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) focused on getting out the message of change. In 2010, it convened the Unbridled Learning Summit at which university faculty, school district representatives, and other education stakeholders discussed the state's new education strategy—with Common Core plans as the centerpiece.

In parallel, KDE, the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, and the Prichard Committee (a statewide education advocacy group focused on engaging parents) launched ReadyKentucky, a public information initiative. Supplying sample letters and other tools, the initiative urged business and community leaders and parents to speak out in support of the new standards and “the importance of staying the course.” (See the sidebar “[More on the ReadyKentucky Initiative](#).”)

The consistent messages delivered through the Unbridled Learning Summit (to those in the education field) and the ReadyKentucky initiative (to the broader community) helped set the stage for implementation of the Common Core. KDE and its partners developed a shared understanding that Kentucky was seeking to dramatically improve student learning and that a great deal of change would be required to achieve this goal. Such deliberate communication efforts seem to be paying off. Results from the new Kentucky tests were announced in late 2012, and revealed that far fewer students were “proficient” or better in reading and math in both elementary and middle school. Yet, despite the big drop in scores (roughly a third or more), there has been no evident backlash in the state against the Common Core, nor any rush to ease the standards. Contrast that to the story in New York in early August 2013 when the state’s first round of Common Core tests showed a similar drop, “unsettling parents, principals, and teachers.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Leadership Networks draw strong teachers to lead change**

KDE knew that the ability to drive unprecedented improvement in teacher practice and student learning through the Common Core would depend on what districts did across schools, principals did within schools, and teachers did within classrooms. The Department therefore put district leaders, principals, and teachers in charge of crafting the approach and developing supports for statewide implementation. It also built their capacity to lead the change. This strategy was embodied in a new system of Leadership Networks that brought together district, school, and classroom leaders.

## More on the ReadyKentucky Initiative

Through ReadyKentucky, partner organizations played a key role in building a strong understanding of the Common Core amongst key education stakeholders, including parents and the business community. In informational pamphlets, ReadyKentucky is described as “an information initiative to help educators, parents, civic leaders, and other Kentuckians understand the state’s public school standards, the tests that are given to measure student performance on those standards, and ways to use test scores to help students, schools, and districts improve.” The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence led outreach and communication with parents. It developed simple, intuitive materials and fact sheets, and sent representatives to meetings with parents and community members to present information on the Common Core and what it means for students. Similarly, the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce created toolkits to help businesses inform their employees about the new standards and their importance for Kentucky. The toolkits included talking points, sample emails, FAQ sheets, blurbs for company newsletters, and even paycheck stuffers with key points about the work underway in Kentucky schools. Through ReadyKentucky, stakeholders were informed and educated about the Common Core and its importance early and often, and through consistent, clear, intuitive messaging.

**Sample presentation:** ReadyKentucky—Building on progress for student success  
[http://www.washington.kyschools.us/doc>Title%20-Assessment/ReadyKY%2045-min%20presentation%20revised9-12\(wAcc\).pdf](http://www.washington.kyschools.us/doc>Title%20-Assessment/ReadyKY%2045-min%20presentation%20revised9-12(wAcc).pdf)

**Sample toolkits:** ReadyKentucky—Building employer support for student success  
<http://kychamber.com/sites/default/files/EmployerKitWeb.pdf>

ReadyKentucky—Building on progress for student success in college, career, and life  
[http://www.prichardcommittee.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/READYKY\\_document.pdf](http://www.prichardcommittee.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/READYKY_document.pdf)

“One thing we wanted to model was that districts needed to be able to solve their own problems,” explained Karen Kidwell, KDE’s director of program standards, who oversees the Networks. “We saw the Leadership Networks as a place to deepen understanding, try out some processes, and bring forward problems that superintendents, principals, and teachers were having in their districts and get feedback from peers.”

The Leadership Networks were designed to enable multidimensional collaboration. Each of the state’s 174 school districts selected a team (three math teachers, three English language arts (ELA) teachers, three principals or other school leaders, up to three district-level supervisors, and the superintendent) to participate in monthly full-day trainings the first two years of implementation and quarterly meetings since then. The Network meetings take place in each of the state’s eight regions. Participants meet in three functional cross-district groups: math teachers with math teachers, ELA teachers with ELA teachers, and principals and superintendents together. Altogether, on a Network meeting day, 24 cross-district teams are meeting across the state. Following these discussions, the district teams come together to figure out how to bring what they’ve learned

back to their districts. KDE also hired 16 content specialists to provide the hands-on coaching in the districts.

Over the past three years, the Leadership Networks have focused on the following:

**Translating the standards and preparing for initial rollout** (2010-11): “One thing that is often missing in state and district orientation sessions is a distinction between what instruction looked like before and what it will look like now,” said Stephanie Hirsh, executive director of Learning Forward, an organization devoted to teacher professional learning that is working with Kentucky. The Leadership Network sessions looked closely at what teachers currently were teaching and students currently were learning, and the ways in which this would change under the Common Core. This meant that members collectively reviewed each standard and ensured that every educator could say, in plain English, what that standard required students to understand. Based on this translation, they developed clear learning targets for students that matched the standards.

**Planning to effectively assess student learning based on the standards** (2011-12): The Networks focused on developing assessment literacy, so that all participants could effectively analyze existing assessments and items for their relation to the new standards, develop new assessments, and use the information from assessments to improve teaching and learning.

**Developing strategies and tools to ensure effective teaching and learning** (2010-present): The Networks established an iterative process in which participants looked at best-practice strategies for teaching the content required by each standard, tried them out in their own classrooms, and then reported and reflected together on their experiences. For example, through Gates Foundation initiatives to build instructional tools to support the Common Core,<sup>13</sup> the Leadership Networks created and vetted rigorous learning experiences for teachers to use in their classrooms that are fully aligned with the standards.

**Strengthening the ability of Network teachers, school leaders, and administrators to lead their local districts in improving teaching** (2012-13): Over the past year, the Networks have reflected on how to continue to improve teaching and how to ensure that such improvement takes place in every school and classroom in the state. Their most recent work has focused on refining and revising instructional support tools (e.g., sample lessons and assessment items) through further field testing, populating an online platform and repository for instructional resources, and working with others in their home districts to address roadblocks or challenges.

This collaborative effort required a lot from state leaders. KDE Commissioner Terry Holliday visited all 174 school districts in the state, meeting with teachers, principals, and district leaders to understand how the process was unfolding. Associate Commissioner Felicia Smith had monthly calls with a group of superintendents to get feedback. The intensive training sessions and group work employed by the Leadership Networks met some resistance. Felicia Smith explained, “That first year we had some districts and schools saying, ‘Just translate the standards into learning

targets; just give us what you want us to do.' We held firmly that no, these Networks are our process; *this is where the learning occurs.*"

***“You need extended time if you’re serious about going deep and solving together...You really need the leaders and teachers in each district to own the work, and then go back and make these changes happen.”***

KAREN KIDWELL, DIRECTOR OF PROGRAM STANDARDS,  
KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Many were persuaded. One principal later remarked: "I feel like this is the right work. It wasn't just, 'Here's the set of standards.' It was: Here's how you assess, here's how you instruct...' It was structured, it was organized, it was given to us in a way we could make manageable. Did it require a lot of change for me as an administrator

and for teachers? Absolutely, but here's how: through an emphasis on highly effective teaching and learning."

### **Continuous improvement**

KDE's Kidwell emphasized that time and continuity were essential to Kentucky's efforts to get Common Core implementation right. "You need extended time if you're serious about going deep and solving together. Our Leadership Network approach is really dependent on helping people recognize their strengths and their talents and skills. We wanted the same group of people for a solid three years because this is hard work, and it needs to be continuous. You really need the leaders and teachers in each district to own the work, and then go back and make these changes happen." Thus the Network approach not only helped districts and schools adapt effectively to the Common Core but is intended to help sustain that improvement over time.

One key element of Kentucky's sustainability strategy is the Continuous Instructional Improvement Technology System (CIITS), an online support center for all of Kentucky's teachers that brings together a variety of resources (e.g., videos, sample lesson plans, an assessment item bank) vetted and utilized by the more than 2,000 teachers who participated in the Leadership Networks. Many districts also are looking to use teacher teams and professional learning communities to bring the problem-solving work that began in the Leadership Networks to the school level.

In tandem with the work of the Networks, and supported by the Learning Forward Transforming Professional Learning Initiative (a national effort to support effective Common Core implementation), KDE continues to build a strong professional learning system to support continuous improvement. This effort includes convening a professional learning task force, contributing to a professional learning policy audit, and considering changes to state legislation and regulations.

The Kentucky story illustrates the powerful role a state education authority can play in catalyzing, enabling, and maintaining changes in instruction across an entire state. The call for change was clear, and the Leadership Networks brought the right implementers forward to lead the charge and develop tools and supports to enable continuous improvement.

## One of the Largest School Districts Uses the Common Core to Improve Instruction

As the eighth largest district in the nation, Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida serves more than 200,000 students in Tampa and the surrounding suburban and rural areas. It is one of the first large districts putting into effect an ambitious plan to implement the Common Core by focusing on district-wide improvement in teaching.

### **Coming to grips with systemic change**

Like Kentucky, Hillsborough County put a great deal of initial effort into helping those essential to Common Core implementation realize that: 1) big changes in instruction would be required, and 2) it was crucial to understand how those changes would look and feel in practice. “We spent the full first year building awareness and commitment at all levels of the district,” said Wynne Tye, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. “We knew it was critical to spend time early on getting everyone on the same page. Our approach to implementation has been to go slow to go fast.”

The district kicked off its implementation in 2011 with a full-day meeting of 50 key stakeholders, including district leaders, state education officials, teachers, principals, and union representatives. The Dana Center of the University of Texas at Austin and the Aspen Institute led the group in an exercise to take stock of teaching and learning in the district and to identify the changes needed to embrace the Common Core.

The kickoff sent a strong message about how much change would be required. “I didn’t really get the full impact until I sat and listened to that entire day and understood what we really needed to be thinking about,” said Lynn Dougherty-Underwood, the district’s director of K-12 literacy and point person for Common Core implementation. “I’ve been through previous reform rollouts in my 32 years with the district. But this time was different. Afterward, I called Wynne and said, ‘Okay, I get it now, and I’m frightened.’ This was not just a reading curriculum shift. This was a systemic change in how we think about instruction for our kids.”

### **Teacher-tailored, teacher-led training**

District leaders knew that a systemic shift in teaching and learning would happen only if teachers helped shape the coming change. Elementary, middle, and high school teachers were part of that first group of 50, and stayed involved. Said Dougherty-Underwood: “In past instructional reform efforts, we would have turned the standards over to the district content folks and said, ‘Okay, you know English, go formulate the right materials.’ Then we handed those materials to teachers and said, ‘This is how instruction will change tomorrow in your classroom.’ But we recognized that for the Common Core to truly change instruction across the district, we needed to spend time developing a shared vision of the ‘why’ among our teachers and those that support them.”

The district brought 260 teachers and other stakeholders to attend an initial six-hour Dana Center-Aspen Institute “deepening” training on the standards. These “teacher leaders” then worked with district personnel to tailor that training to fit their content and grade level needs, and rolled it out in an effort to reach Hillsborough’s more than 15,000 teachers. This training is led by members of that core group of teachers, and offered one evening a week and on Saturdays. The district cannot mandate attendance but offers a stipend as an incentive. So far, 3,335 middle and high school training slots (some teachers attend multiple sessions based on their teaching assignments) and 9,214 elementary training slots have been filled.

***“If a teacher comes out of one six-hour training and says ‘I get it,’ then I know they didn’t because it’s a much heavier lift than that.”***

WYNNE TYE, ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT  
FOR CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION,  
HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The district also has created teacher teams in various subject areas and grades to create model instructional modules and student scoring rubrics aligned to the Common Core, and to introduce them in their schools. “These modules have been great opportunities for teachers to come together to discuss student work

and, in so doing, to understand the shift required by the Common Core,” said Tye. For example, a team might discuss 12th graders’ analysis of *Federalist Number 10*, exploring students’ ability to not only understand the arguments in the text but also their ability to explore how author James Madison used and refined the meaning of a key term like “faction” over the course of his writing. Dougherty-Underwood noted the power of this approach: “We’ve worked on setting expectations together with teachers. It’s not ‘teacher, do this.’ Their expertise will drive how we meet those expectations. And across the board, teachers seem very excited about the instructional shifts we’re making, like reconnecting reading and writing.”

### A new way of working

Hillsborough County education leaders recognize that the initial round of teacher-led trainings and teacher-developed modules will not by themselves sustain the kind of instructional improvement that the Common Core will require. “If a teacher comes out of one six-hour training and says ‘I get it,’ then I know they didn’t because it’s a much heavier lift than that,” Tye said.

The district already has a system of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in its schools. These are small groups of teachers who meet regularly to study more effective teaching and learning practices. Tye wants to use the PLCs to provide ongoing support for implementing the new standards. The district is working to increase the time that teachers have to participate in the small groups and the quality of the conversations within them, though Tye admits that it will be challenging to use the same approach across 250 schools. The union and district have agreed that every Monday school will end early to allow for planning time for teachers; the district cannot mandate how that time is used, but it is offering

ideas for how teachers can connect and continue working together to effectively improve their practice.

Dougherty-Underwood also stresses that sustaining Common Core implementation will require a permanent shift in the work of instructional improvement (e.g., structures like PLCs that enable teachers to meet periodically). Accordingly, while not increasing the overall instructional budget, Hillsborough has focused existing funds on activities deemed productive for instructional improvement aligned with the new standards. “This is our way of work now,” Dougherty-Underwood said.

The work underway in Hillsborough County shows how a district can seize the opportunity of the Common Core to improve instruction. The early investment of time and resources to develop momentum and a common message, the empowerment of teacher leaders to shape and lead instructional shifts, and the use of PLCs to provide ongoing support should be elements of any district’s plan. Hillsborough County’s three-pronged strategy is a promising approach to jumpstart and fuel improvement in the teacher practice and student learning of the Common Core.

## A Technical Assistance Provider Helps Teachers Become Partners in Creating a Common Core Implementation Strategy

School systems have long relied on TA providers to support professional development for teachers and principals. Because the Common Core requires changes in how teachers teach, TA providers will be critical in helping teachers rethink how they work.

***“We have learned that districts need to do professional development with versus to teachers.”***

ALETA MARGOLIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
CENTER FOR INSPIRED TEACHING

The nonprofit Center for Inspired Teaching, for example, is supporting Common Core implementation in the Baltimore and Washington, DC, school systems. It uses a professional development method

that encourages teachers to become full collaborators in school improvement and reform strategies—a model that seems tailor-made for the Common Core. “We have learned that districts need to do professional development *with* versus *to* teachers,” said Aleta Margolis, executive director of Center for Inspired Teaching. “For the Common Core to become a powerful tool instead of a mandated burden, teachers must be active participants in the creation of the implementation strategy.”

Inspired Teaching’s work with middle school social studies teachers in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) reflects two of the key themes present in the Kentucky and Hillsborough County approaches: making sure teachers are supported to lead and shape the needed changes, and equipping teachers with the tools they need to keep improving their instruction.

Inspired Teaching's program in DCPS is known as BLISS (Building Literacy in the Social Studies). Its goal is to improve literacy and social studies instruction in the district by helping teachers reflect on the practice that will achieve the ELA standards in social studies and then create appropriate instructional materials aligned to that practice.

Inspired Teaching began this DCPS work with 20 social studies teachers, representing middle schools across the city. Over two years, they worked with these teachers to develop, test, and refine a series of instructional modules linked to each unit for 6th, 7th, and 8th grade social studies. As a starting point, they used tools developed by the national Literacy Design Collaborative. In the first year, the teacher leaders met every month, both as a full group and in smaller grade-level teams.

"The sessions are always very collaborative, with the goal of having the teachers do 90 percent of the talking," said Inspired Teaching's Jenna Fournel. "We pose questions and provide activities along the way to keep the discoveries coming."

For example, the teachers had to grapple with how to use primary sources with students who were not at reading level that would make these texts accessible. "We had them take a letter from Lincoln and figure out how they could cut it down to 600 words," said Fournel. "Then they looked at that letter next to a speech Lincoln gave later in his career and figured out what additional sources they'd need to read in order to make an argument for or against calling Lincoln The Great Emancipator." Teachers brainstormed the sorts of things students might need. Then, in a subsequent class, they used these sources to practice forming arguments based on what they read. "Many of them had never seen the texts we ended up using; they were learning just like their students would," said Fournel. "They appreciated the opportunity to 'not know' and learn with colleagues, so they could share their learning with their students."

These teachers then helped share the tools and lessons they developed with middle school social studies teachers throughout the district—both during district-wide professional development days and as part of the day-to-day work of individual schools. Margolis explained that this sharing process was not left to chance. "We spend time with our teacher leaders on, say, how to teach social studies to 7th graders. Then, we have a whole separate component about how to teach this to their colleagues. Just because a teacher knows how to be a good teacher of students doesn't mean that they know how to be a good teacher of other teachers. Our program explicitly teaches this skill." Using teacher leaders turned out to be a good approach, said Fournel. "In general, teachers loved being able to hear from their peers. You could feel a measurable difference in the level of trust and attention when a teacher leader was presenting versus someone from DCPS or even from our organization."

Inspired Teaching is now working on a toolkit that will help scale this teacher-to-teacher instruction. But getting teachers throughout the district on board proved to be challenging at times, especially when there wasn't strong support

from school leaders. Fournel reflected, “We found that we would get a lot of teachers interested in piloting the modules, but then some would drop off when they realized it was a lot of work. Middle school social studies isn’t a tested subject area in DC, so these teachers were often asked to do things outside their subject areas, like tests prep for ELA. Some teachers felt principals didn’t really understand what they were trying to do with the modules, even though DCPS said this work was a priority for them.”

To increase support within the school itself, Inspired Teaching is now working with the District’s Master Educators who evaluate social studies teachers, hoping that once the Master Educators see the benefits of the tools and training, they will send their positive reviews to the principal. And they are working closely with principals, sharing letters of support from the central office and bringing central office staff into these meetings to underscore the investment of DCPS in the project.

In terms of participant satisfaction, at least, BLISS has been a success. A midyear survey of participants found that 100 percent would recommend the program to other teachers. A large majority also felt BLISS was better than other professional development they’ve experienced and that most of the program content had been directly relevant to their needs. One teacher commented on the value of having time to plan with other teachers: “I greatly enjoy collaborating and critiquing my own work. Having a chance to create, implement, evaluate, and revise similar units with other teachers has really helped me grow as a teacher.”

Inspired Teaching and DCPS are now considering extending BLISS to high school social studies and developing a similar program for science teachers to support effective instruction of the new science standards.

Reflecting on Inspired Teaching’s work in DCPS and in Baltimore, where it also has supported Common Core implementation, Inspired Teaching’s Margolis said, “I think that both districts have made a shift in how they view teachers—in part due to working with us. A couple of years ago the question might have been ‘What type of professional development is needed to get everyone trained on the Common Core?’ We’re seeing signs that the question is now about how they can engage teachers as partners in achieving what the Common Core asks of students and the type of professional development that teachers will need to help lead the way.”

Indeed, Inspired Teaching shows a promising approach to reworking teacher professional development into a set of experiences where teachers do the majority of the talking and collaborate to develop the tools and supports they need to implement the changes necessitated by the rigor of the Common Core.

## Beyond “Teacher, Do This”

New York’s Commissioner King is right. There is a big risk that the Common Core won’t change instruction dramatically enough for more students to succeed in college and careers. If the field continues to focus its concerns on teacher accountability linked to test scores and on whether the Common Core should

be implemented at all—there is little reason to expect that the hard work of improving teaching and learning through the standards will ever happen.

If more states, districts, and TA providers take on the type of work being led by the Kentucky Department of Education, Hillsborough County Public Schools, and Center for Inspired Teaching, however, there is hope for better outcomes. Hirsh, of Learning

Forward, underscored: “Substantive transformation in educator practice and results for all students requires powerful professional learning. Too few educators have access to effective professional learning, and as a result too few students experience excellent teaching every day. The cases dictate what is possible when educators recognize the power of transformative professional learning and invest what is necessary to achieve its results.” Anyone looking to improve the odds that the Common Core will improve teaching and learning, and help more students be ready for college and career, should consider at least these strategies:

- 1. Communicate the strong potential of the Common Core to dramatically improve teacher practice and student learning:** State and district leaders must embrace the Common Core’s high bar, honestly assess their starting point, come to terms with how much teaching and learning must change to meet that high bar, and get educators, parents, business leaders, and other key stakeholders on board to help build a common understanding of the work ahead.
- 2. Empower teachers to collectively define what changes in practice need to look like and then lead the hard work to make those changes:** State and district leaders must support teachers—the most important implementers—in getting beyond their usual routines and building a realistic understanding of the demands of the Common Core. They also should provide teachers with ways to work together to develop, test, and refine the changes in teaching and student assessment that will be needed to meet those demands.
- 3. Provide teachers and those who support them with the structures, time, and resources required to sustain improvement over many years:** State and district leaders must appreciate that the Common Core will require a long journey of instructional improvement, supported by all levels of the organization. They must demonstrate their commitment to this journey through structures, resources, and leadership that help teachers, principals, and other education stakeholders keep learning and keep improving.

Furthermore, these efforts need to be integrated across the multiple levels of the educational system. States, school districts, TA providers, and funders need to align and coordinate their work. All the players must put aside existing perceptions that the status quo is sufficient and come to the table prepared to honestly face the magnitude of the change needed for students to meet the high standards of the Common Core.

*“Too few educators have access to effective professional learning, and as a result too few students experience excellent teaching...”*

STEPHANIE HIRSCH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
LEARNING FORWARD

This type of systems change work is not easy. It's not easy for a state education authority to develop statewide networks that bring leaders and teachers together, to roll up their sleeves and determine how to change teacher practice in every classroom. It's not easy for a district to completely rethink its approach to professional development so that teachers both lead and learn through the experience. And it's not easy for principals and teachers to find the time and energy to collaboratively develop instructional supports and coach their peers on using them to transform their practice.

While it may not be easy, it is critical. The real opportunity of the Common Core is not to revamp accountability. It is to raise the bar so that students leave high school prepared for success in college and career. And the most important thing state and district leaders and their TA providers and funders can do to capitalize on the opportunity is to support teachers to improve their practice in big ways. The work of Kentucky, Hillsborough County, and Center for Inspired Teaching shows what it looks like to seize the opportunity of the Common Core to change teaching practice and student learning. As more education leaders take on this mindset, examples like these should be less difficult to find.

### **Additional Resources**

- Common Core 360 website (free 30-day trial for teachers nationwide; utilized by Kentucky teachers): <http://www.schoolimprovement.com/common-core-360/>
- Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning: <http://learningforward.org/standards-for-professional-learning>
- Learning Forward Transforming Professional Learning initiative: <http://www.learningforward.org/publications/implementing-common-core>
- Literacy Design Collaborative: <http://www.literacydesigncollaborative.org/>
- Inspired Teaching's instructional model: <http://www.inspiredteaching.org/about/our-model>
- Mathematics Design Collaborative tools: <http://www.mygroupgenius.org/mathematics>

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*The authors would like to thank Commissioner Terry Holliday, Commissioner John King, David Cook, Felicia Smith, Karen Kidwell, Superintendent Terri Cox-Cruey, Lynn Dougherty-Underwood, Wynne Tye, Aleta Margolis, Jenna Fournel, and Stephanie Hirsh for sharing their stories and contributing to the development of the case examples in this article; Lauren Foukes and Colleen Ferrand-Andrew for their thought partnership and research support; and editor Bradley Seeman.*

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